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Literacy Library and the Functional Literacy Skills of the 21st Century Adult Learners

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Abstract

Literacy and library are like Siamese twins that cannot be separated. Society draw literacy skills from the libraries the same way an individual draws from his memory to meet his immediate information needs. Examined in this paper is the relevance of literacy library to the functional literacy need of the 21st Century adult learners. Literacy library is conceptualised as a special library provision targeted at adult members of the society who have enrolled or willing to enrol in a learning programme. Key features of Literacy library are outlined, followed by brief description of specific materials relevant to the 21st century learning engagement of adult. Few studies on public library have focused on addressing problems facing adult learners in accessing library services. This paper recognised the fundamental role Literacy libraries can play in confronting the exclusion of adult learners in library provision and also provided useful insights to the peculiar nature of their literacy needs in their given context.

Key Words: Literacy Library; 21st Century; Adult Learners; Lifelong Learning

Introduction

The growing rate of adult illiteracy in developing countries, with its social and economic implications, is a concern to stakeholders both at the continental and global levels. The reason is not far-fetched, literacy is considered a basic human right as it has been linked to higher levels of dignity, self-esteem, economic well-being and improved public health (Olaniran, 2013; World Atlas, 2017). Little wonder that the fourth of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is targeted towards achieving inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (SDG Compass, 2019). Despite many continental and global literacy interventions, several countries in Africa are still submerged in the miry clay of youth and adult illiteracy. In Nigeria for instance, the data released in 2018 by the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC), through its Executive Secretary, put the number of illiterate adult and youths at 60 Million. This comprises out-of-school youths and non-literate adults, including

illiterate women who are mostly found in rural communities doing petty trading and other agricultural businesses without reading, writing and arithmetic skills (Aroge & Olaniran, 2012).

South Sudan has one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world (UNESCO, 2019). According to UNESCO, the number of illiterate individuals aged 15 years and above in the country is more than 70 percent of the entire population (APA-Juba, 2017). Several factors have been identified as drivers of illiteracy in the country. These include prolonged political and civil unrest, violence and warfare, as well as inadequate resources when it comes to financing literacy programmes (Tabiedi, 2004; World Atlas, 2017). Similarly in South Africa, lack of reading resources and libraries, as well as little to no reinforcement of learning at home has been identified as factors responsible for growing rate of illiteracy (Newman, 2018). Steven le Roux, the Chief Executive Officer a South African based non-profit organization called Project Literacy, lamented on the subtle growing rate of illiteracy:

We increasingly find that the youth and adults who come to our learning centres are people who are above Grade 9 in school level but have language, literacy and communication levels (especially in English) way below what it should be. They are unable to engage with their further education, and this can account for the very low throughput rate at FET and vocational colleges. They have also been given a false sense of their abilities as they have been progressed through a school system that tells them that they are at a certain level, but, in fact, their competencies are below that,”

Also in Ethiopia, the high rate of poverty has been linked with the growing rate of illiteracy (Enquobahrie, 2004; Gesesew et al., 2016; Rainbow for the Future, 2019; Lee et al., 2019). Only a small percentage of the country's population have access to quality education as many prefer to work rather than study because of fear of survival. Small scale farmers, who constitutes the largest group of poor people in Ethiopia, lacks basic literacy skills to update their tools to grow better crops (Gomez, 2017).

The literacy situation of many countries in Africa, as highlighted above, poses a great danger on the socio-economic development of the continent as no meaningful development can be achieved in a society where almost half of the population lack reading, writing and arithmetic skills not to talk of some other skills required to function effectively in today's knowledge economy (Olaniran, 2018a). In other words, a 21st Century adult must possess functional literacy skills required to function or cope with the dynamics and complexities of today's society. He must be able to read a newspaper in both print and digital formats, complete a job application, understand government policies and programmes and able to make decisions

through them, understand what it means to have a climate change and what action of individuals contribute to it.

While there is broad consensus about the importance of public library to literacy development of individuals in a society, there is limited research about the importance of a special library for adult learners and what impact such library has on equipping adult learners with the skills, knowledge and values necessary to become responsible and responsive to societal needs. Of important note is the skill to access and use information in electronic formats which every 21st century compliant adult must possess (Olaniran, Duma & Nzima, 2016; Olaniran, 2017a). The argument of this paper, therefore, is towards the establishment of a special library which will serve the purpose of providing specific literacy and information needs of adult members of a society. Implications being raised in this paper provide a basis by which more proactive measures can be taken by the government and other stakeholders in education towards recognising the adrangological dynamics of adult learning and making provision for this need through a special library service.

Defining Basic and Functional Literacy Skills in the 21st Century Context

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” – Alvin Toffler.

Literacy is one of the concepts that have proved to be both multidimensional and ever-changing because it continued to be defined and interpreted in diverse ways. To a lay man or someone with basic mind-set of the concept, literacy is just about reading, writing and numeracy. Although, acquiring reading, writing and arithmetic skills is one of the steps towards becoming a literate person, however, this is not all what the concept of literacy is about. The information-driven nature of the present age, innovations and inventions, technological advancement as well as various dynamics associated with the 21st century constitutes the major reason why an individual must see education or literacy as a lifelong affair (Olaniran, Duma & Nzima, 2017b). In other words, as society changes, so does literacy. In fact, the 21st century knowledge economy demands that a literate person possesses a wide range of skills, abilities and competencies (Australian Literacy Educators’ Association, 2019). This is why the word ‘multi-literacies’ is perfectly used to describe the experiences, competencies and engagements which a 21st century man must continue to have

to stay relevant and up-to-date in his/her field of endeavour. UNESCO (2004) supports this assertion by defining literacy as the:

.. ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written (and visual) materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential and to participate fully in the wider society.

This definition of literacy by UNESCO encompasses diverse dimensions of literacies such as basic and functional literacy, information literacy, financial literacy, computer literacy, and vocational literacy, among others. These are varieties of literacy engagements which a 21st century man is expected to possess to be able to transact successfully in the 21st century.

Furthermore, Education Development Centre (2012) compares literacy with power:

the power of literacy lies not only in the ability to read and write, but rather in an individual's capacity to put those skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life'. In other words, we can simply put that any literacy effort which does not enable the recipient to function effectively in the society in which he/she belong is a failed one.

Moreover, Koffi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, described literacy to be:

a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty, and a building block of development, an essential complement to investments in roads, dams, clinics and factories. Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. Especially for girls and women, it is an agent of family health and nutrition. For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.... Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential. (Casalina, 2014: np).

Similarly, Canadian Council of Learning (2007) notes literacy to be:

an essential part of the fabric of modern societies, a thread that links all aspects of life and living in our contemporary world. Its reach is extensive and complex, influencing how fully and effectively a person is able to engage in the social and economic life of his or her community.

UNESCO (2010) views literacy to be:

the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.

In summary, all the aforementioned submissions about literacy revealed its importance in combating various challenges facing this century.

Meanwhile, it is important to distinguish between basic illiteracy and functional illiteracy and this can be simply explained by the two words ‘know’ and ‘do’. In other words, basic illiteracy means a person cannot read or write at all. While functional illiteracy depicts an individual who have basic reading, writing and numerical skills but unable to apply them to accomplish tasks that are necessary to make informed decisions or participate fully in everyday life. Such tasks may include: interpreting a medicine prescription, balancing a chequebook, filling out a job application, reading and responding to correspondence in the workplace, filling out a home loan application, reading a bank statement, among others. Another good example of a functionally illiterate individual is an unemployed Bachelor degree holder without requisite computer knowledge and skills to upload his/her Curriculum Vitae on a job portal. While this individual may be seen to be a literate person being in possession of a qualification, he cannot be said to be functionally literate due to his inability to perform a task that can meet his employment need.

Furthermore, the importance of functionality in functional literacy was emphasized in the submission of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1997) on functional literacy:

the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work, and in the community—to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

Corroborating the aforementioned submissions, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2008) summarised what functional literacy should help an individual achieve in today’s knowledge economy. These include:

- Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology;
- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others

- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts; and
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

Therefore, unlike basic literacy which focuses majorly on the acquisition of 3Rs, i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic skills (Aroge & Olaniran, 2012 & Olaniran, 2018b), functional literacy deals with how people actually use 3Rs and other essential skills and competencies to solve both personal and societal problems.

Why Literacy Library?

In my conceptualisation of Literacy library, I categorise it as a special library. There is a distinct line of demarcation between a special library and a public library (Ashikuzzaman, 2013). A public library is a library facility that is accessible by the general public and its services are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status (UNESCO, 2014). The primary purposes of public libraries, according to Akparobore (2011), are as follows:

- a. To enable information/education opportunities for the citizens in the communities.
- b. To enrich the knowledge of individuals in various subject disciplines where they undertake formal education.
- c. To provide awareness to meet the information needs of people.
- d. To support the educational, civil and cultural activities of groups and organisations.
- e. To provide recreational opportunities and encourage constructive use of leisure time.

Special library, on the other hand, serves the purpose of providing library services to certain category of individuals based on the peculiarity of their situation, profession, or learning. Examples of special libraries are medical library, war library, special needs library, and engineering library, among others.

The American Library Association (ALA, 2019) defines a special library as:

a library established, supported and administered by a business firm, private corporation, association, government agency, or other special interest group of agency to meet the information needs of its members or staff in pursuing the

goals of the organization. Scope of collections and services is limited to the subject interest of the host or parent organization.

Ranganathan (1937) is also of the view that some libraries are organized to serve the needs of specialist readers. In this case, a Literacy library is expected to serve the purposes of providing special library service to adult learners based on the nature of their learning. Since public libraries are established primarily to take care of the general public, a special library is needed for the use of adult learners, especially those undergoing non-formal education programmes for the purpose of becoming functional in their society. Also, as an adult literacy advocate, I have observed that many public libraries in developing nations are more children and youth-friendly than adult learners' friendly. In a baseline survey which I conducted recently among the adult learners in a government-funded literacy programme in Nigeria, majority of the participants interviewed (mostly in their 50s) expressed their reservations for using public libraries. A participant remarked:

Anytime I visit public libraries, I feel intimidated by the presence of young people who are college students. I am not always free reading a lower grade text while sharing desk with young college students.

Another reason is the fact that adult learners are matured learners who needs a considerable level of comfort and convenience while using library. While it is important to acknowledge the roles being played by public libraries worldwide in promoting reading, writing and arithmetic skills, my concern is whether public libraries can adequately meet the learning needs of all categories of adult learners. In other words, I continue to wonder whether the matured adult learners with aspirations to acquire agricultural literacy skills or those in their 50s preparing for school leaving examinations can conveniently use a public library. One of the objectives of this paper, therefore, is to look more deeply into how and why a special library is needed to accommodate and promote the lifelong learning needs of adult learners.

What to consider in constructing a Literacy Library?

Adult and non-formal education is a special educational programme designed to suit the learning needs of the beneficiaries. Unlike the formal school system where learning activities are regimented with strict curriculum and time-table for students, adult learning is a learners' centred programme with flexible learning curriculum. According to Malcolm Knowles, the famous American Adult Education scholar who adapted the theory of Andragogy, helping adult to learn requires some considerations and strategies (McConnell, 2013). The reason is

that adult learners are matured learners and their maturity brings unique characteristics that influences how they are motivated to learn. These characteristics includes maturity, experience, self-directed, goal-oriented, and needs-driven, among others. Therefore, it is recommended for anyone or organization that wants to build a Literacy library to pay attention to these unique characteristics. In other words, by considering the unique qualities and nature of adult learners, one can design more effective and motivating library service.

While it may not be realistic to state generically what should be items or materials in a Literacy library, it is suggested that the library mirrors the nature and needs of the target beneficiaries. A rural-based adult education promoter with intentions to open a Literacy library can consider having the following in the library:

- i. **Primer:** Webster dictionary defines a primer to be a small introductory book on a subject or object of learning. The word ‘primer’ is used in adult and non-formal education to replace the word ‘textbook’. Primers are special materials produced for the use of adult learners who are undergoing educational activities with the aim of acquiring reading, writing and arithmetic skills. Most primers are compendium of pictures, symbols and graphical representation of a learning activity that can easily stimulate the interest of a learner on a subject of learning.
- ii. **Teaching materials for Facilitators:** Adult education facilitators in developing countries are often faced with the problems of accessing materials suitable for learning needs of their clienteles. Many of them uses improvised materials which are normally discarded immediately after teaching-learning activities. Literacy Library can serve as reservoir of workbooks, facilitators’ guide and other learning materials for easy access to facilitator in literacy programmes.
- iii. **Newspapers:** Newspapers and magazines are essential sources of information and media literacy for adult learners. Daily events, government policies and press releases are always captured by newspaper and periodicals which makes them essential materials to read on daily basis. Newspapers are also sources of civic education and current affairs for many adult citizens. Literacy library, as a facility which provides access to the 21st century literacies, must create a section for displaying and keeping of current and past newspapers, both in print and digital formats.
- iv. **Radio and Television Set:** We are in a media-driven age with dominant effects of radio and television broadcasts. Radio is a formidable medium through which

information can reach a mass audience, simultaneously and at relatively low cost (Olaniran, 2013). Using radio and television as mediums of instruction is always considered as one of the best options in reaching out to adult learners. Therefore, radio and television sets are crucial learning materials that must be present in a literacy library for the learning needs of the 21st century adult learners.

- v. **Short videos:** Short videos are being produced to address some of the pressing issues posing dangers to humanity and environment today. According to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, a short film is an original motion picture that has a running time of 40 minutes or less that provokes deep thought and/or conversation about an issue of interest to an individual or audience watching. Awareness and campaigns on life-threatening issues today are better promoted through short videos which can be produced in local dialects of people living in rural communities. Issues like HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, pollution, climate change, disease control, poverty reduction, youth entrepreneurship, maternal health, polio control, among others are being addressed in most of the developed nations through the use of short videos. Short videos of this kind can be kept in the literacy library where learners can easily access them.
- vi. **Learning Games:** Games have proved to be one of the essential tools for learning of both young and old. One reason to promote learning through games is to encourage learners to learn in an atmosphere of fun and amusement. When adults go out of their way to play games, it helps develop their non-cognitive skills, which are as fundamental as cognitive skills. Some games are also capable of helping the reading, writing and numeracy abilities of the learners. It also helps in boosting social relation skills of those who are shy or busy to make friends. While planning a literacy library, it is essential for the planners to also consider getting some educational games as part of the tools of effective literacy acquisition.

Conclusion

Library is an important channel through which a literate society could be achieved. Thus far, the paper has been able to stress the importance of library in achieving a literate society while also established the reason why special library facility is required for the learning engagements of adult in any society. Moreover, the sitting arrangement in most of the public

libraries are not suitable for the use of adult learners. Likewise the books and other materials often found in public libraries most of the time are not suitable for adult to use. Also, many adult learners prefer a learning community with whom they can interact with peers and discuss questions and issues. At a generalised level, literacy library may provide a baseline for raising awareness of, and commitment to, the growing knowledge intensity about the dynamics of adult education as well as the complexities of adult learning in the 21st century. Therefore, the provision of literacy libraries in communities where adult literacy centres are established is crucial and indispensable to achieving the goal of adult and non-formal education programmes. It is when this is done that a society could be said is ready to provide quality education and lifelong learning for all which is the number four of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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